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Probe is sought of reported CIA role with contras

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WASHINGTON — Sen. John F. Kerry yesterday requested that the Justice Department investigate a report that the Central Intelligence Agency may have circumvented the congressional ban on providing aid to Nicaraguan rebels by hiring a group of mercenaries who trained with the rebels in 1984 and 1985.

In a letter to Attorney General Edwin Meese, Kerry said, "These new allegations are serious and I believe they merit an in-depth investigation by the Justice Department."

Quoting intelligence sources in the United States and Costa Rica, the Boston Sunday Globe reported that the CIA sponsored the sending of several mercenaries to Central America through a private Alabama-based group called Civilian Military Assistance in late 1984 and 1985.

US intelligence officials were so concerned about the group's activities that the CIA contracted with a second, smaller group to join the CMA in order to spy on its operation.

Ultimately, the entire operation proved a failure and five of the mercenaries were jailed for over a year in Costa Rica on possession of munitions charges.

A Justice Department spokesman said that Meese will study Kerry's letter and The Globe article and provide a "proper response" to Kerry.

CIA spokeswoman Kathy Pherson said the agency was prohibited by law from responding to allegations about covert activity by the agency. However, she said, the CIA "has always complied with congressional restrictions."

Also, Pherson noted that a November 1984 report by the Senate Intelligence Committee, which oversees covert CIA activity, said that agency officials had denied any involvement with CMA. That testimony, which came before the agency's alleged contacts with CMA described in The Globe, was prompted by the deaths of two CMA mercenaries in a helicopter crash on the Honduras-Nicaragua border in September 1984.

The CIA has been barred by law from providing covert assistance to Nicaraguan rebels, known as contras.

One of The Globe's sources for its article was a contract agent for the CIA. The agent, who asked that his name not be used, said he had contracted with a CIA official to pay and send several mercenaries to Central America through CMA. The contract agent, who agreed to the interview because he was angry at the Reagan administration's failure to secure the mercenaries' release from jail, said he was told by his CIA contact to "bird-dog" the CMA operations to determine if the mercenaries were a group of "superpatriots or just nuts."

The intelligence source said he kept the agency informed of his findings but has yet to submit a bill for his expenses, which he estimated at less than \$10,000.